

## Quantum Consciousness, Quantum Miracles, Quantum Failure

By Geoff Gilpin

### Part I: Quantum consciousness

I wrote *The Maharishi Effect* because I wanted answers to questions that were bugging me since I left the Transcendental Meditation movement in the 1970s. Some questions—like “how could something so pure and idealistic go so far off the rails?”—turned out to have simple answers, like “we were young and stupid.” One of the harder questions took me to the source of Maharishi’s philosophy.

Everything that Maharishi teaches comes from a single idea—the belief that all reality is created by consciousness. Consciousness creates your internal world of ideas and feelings as well as the material world of planets and stars and galaxies.

This belief is fairly common among religious mystics, although Maharishi takes it further than most. In his view, the connection between consciousness and the physical world isn’t just a philosophical question. It’s a practical way to create any reality you want. According to Maharishi, people who practice his meditation techniques can levitate, control the weather, put an end to war, and generally create heaven on earth.

Again, these sorts of claims aren’t that unusual. Lots of religious people believe that they can influence the world through prayer or ritual. Maharishi ups the ante once more by claiming to have scientific proof. Human levitation may seem like a miracle, but it’s really just a feature of quantum physics. You can float in the air because the laws of quantum mechanics are part of your consciousness and you can manipulate them as you please.

During my time in the TM movement, I was always uncomfortable with these claims. It didn’t help when the movement PR machine touted the Maharishi Effect (the purported law of physics, not my book) as the greatest achievement in the history of science.

The hubris stuck with me long after I left the movement, but so did a nagging urge to make sense of quantum theory. Is it true that human consciousness is tied into the basic fabric of matter and energy? Can human decisions have instantaneous effects on the other side of the galaxy?

The usual caveat about this subject comes from Richard Feynman: “I think it is safe to say that nobody understands quantum mechanics.” I certainly don’t. However, I’ve done about as much as an intelligent layperson could do. On top of a few college physics courses, I’ve read a number of books on the subject and interviewed several physicists and philosophers while I was researching *The Maharishi Effect*. Here’s my take on the subject:

The confusion about quantum mechanics and human consciousness goes back to the early days of modern science. When Bohr and Heisenberg and their colleagues were formulating quantum theory, they were confronted with experiments that seemed to violate common sense. In the “double slit experiment,” light can behave like a wave or a particle depending on how the experimental apparatus is set up. According to Bohr and his colleagues, light isn’t “really” a wave or particle until the experiment is performed. Before that, it’s just a bunch of mathematical probabilities. The experimental observation itself produces the wave or particle.

That’s the famous “Copenhagen interpretation” of quantum mechanics. Copenhagen was the first of many interpretations, but it’s not necessarily the best. Many scientists prefer the newer model of “quantum decoherence” in which a quantum system interacts with its environment to produce the familiar results of classical physics.

However, Copenhagen came first and set the tone of the discussion for many years. As I see it, one of the problems with Copenhagen is its emphasis on experimental observation which, for better or worse, implies the presence of an observer.

There’s no reason why a human observer (or an animal or robot or anything else) has to be present to produce quantum effects. The sort of thing that happens in the double slit experiment is going on all the time in the earth’s atmosphere and outer space and everywhere. However, once we hear the word “observer” our anthropocentrism kicks in and we start assuming that it’s all about us. The truth is that consciousness—and human beings in general—don’t play any special role in quantum physics any more than they did in the clockwork universe of Newton and Galileo.

But what if they could? What if we could influence quantum events through thought or meditation? Could we manipulate the basic laws of nature to produce levitation or ESP or win the lottery?

Probably not. Once you move up past the level of atoms and molecules, quantum effects get folded into the mundane rules of cause and effect that govern daily life. For instance, there’s solid scientific proof that quantum events can’t transmit information faster than the speed of light. If you try to do so, the result is random noise. Quantum communication doesn’t seem to have any advantage over, say, radio and television.

If you could control quantum events with your mind, the results would probably be a lot less spectacular than flying through the air like Superman. You might attain all the power and influence of an oxygen atom in the atmosphere.

Of course, this kind of boring analysis wouldn’t sell many DVDs. The version of quantum mechanics that turns up in pop culture—in new age books and self-help seminars—has very little to do with the real thing. This version begins with the assumption that human consciousness is right there at the center of everything. From there on, it’s all miracles and magic. Quantum theory becomes a kind of cosmic

MasterCard, a key to psychic power and perfect health and financial success, none of which has any basis in science.

Unfortunately, the success of the pop pseudoscience industry has buried the real thing. Most Americans—if they've heard of quantum physics at all—know it in the form of a cartoon parody.

That's a striking parallel with the situation in biology. According to a 2007 CBS News poll, 51% of Americans believe that God created human beings exactly as they are now without evolution.

In 2007, two generations after Sputnik, a majority of Americans reject or misunderstand the most important theories in both physics and biology. The consequences for the nation are easy enough to imagine. The harshest results may fall on those who promote quantum mysticism and other dubious theories.

## Part II: Quantum miracles

Flying in dreams is so cool. There's that wonderful moment when you're running along and you leap up and take off and glide over the ground. The sense of freedom and exhilaration is so powerful, so delicious. Then you come down and wake up. Bummer.

I love dreams of flying. If Maharishi could really teach me to fly, I'd pony up his \$7K fee in a moment.

Heck, I'd rather have peace in Iraq than flying. If Maharishi's "scientifically proven solutions" to crime and war and poverty really had a chance of working, I'd drop everything and spend the rest of my life on the phone trying to raise the billions he wants.

That's the argument you hear from the TM movement—if there's even a small chance that Maharishi's programs might work, shouldn't we give them a try? I don't think so. For one thing, Maharishi's "solutions" fit too well into a long history of failure.

People have proposed scientific explanations for miracles and the paranormal since the beginning of the scientific era. When Dr. Mesmer treated the fashionable ladies of Paris in the late 1700s, he attributed his miraculous powers to a subtle form of magnetic energy. The rise of Spiritualism in the nineteenth century coincided with the discovery of electromagnetic fields, leading to speculation that thoughts and consciousness travel via electromagnetism.

In my parents' day, it was relativity and atomic energy. Now it's quantum mechanics and string theory. Paranormal researchers keep up with the technology, too, from the earliest box cameras to computers and ground-penetrating radar.

The problem is that none of this ever goes anywhere. Scientific research into psychic phenomena has been going on for over 200 years with little to show for it.

In science, stagnancy is a killer. If a hypothesis doesn't eventually bear fruit, if it doesn't generate new avenues of research, you can ignore it with a clear conscience.

When I was doing interviews for my book, I asked a TM movement scientist about this issue. If the Maharishi Effect really is the greatest discovery in the history of science, as the movement claims, why isn't the scientific community paying attention? He told me the problem is that scientists are biased against anything new that rocks the boat. The Maharishi Effect is so revolutionary that we have to revise everything else in physics to accommodate it. That's a threat to the scientific establishment, so they won't permit it.

I don't buy that argument. Science just doesn't work that way.

It's certainly true that scientists have all the human failings of ego and politics and hide-bound conservatism that plague other disciplines, but what ultimately matters is whether the numbers add up. For example, early in the last century, the old guard in physics, including Einstein, initially resisted the new quantum theory. But the experimental evidence for the Uncertainty Principle and other unsettling phenomena was so compelling that, within a decade, the revolution was over and quantum mechanics was the new foundation of physics.

Another big upheaval could come this week. It could even start in the TM movement. Of course, the evidence would have to be pretty solid—on the order of the double-slit experiments that kicked off the quantum revolution a hundred years ago.

You'd expect some dramatic results if the Maharishi Effect is as powerful as they say it is. After all, they claim that the number of people meditating in the Golden Dome of Pure Knowledge in Iowa controls the number of floods and hurricanes and other natural disasters throughout the world. This effect, if it happens, is on a much larger and more public scale than the tiny blips of quantum events.

So what do we get to back up the movement's claims? The evidence for the Maharishi Effect—like that for astrology and ESP—is buried deep in statistical analysis. Movement researchers plug the meditation numbers and a ton of social and environmental data into a computer program that finds statistical correlations. They produce graphs showing the number of meditators going up and down in synch with the crime rate and the stock market and the changes in weather patterns.

What are the rest of us supposed to believe? The best I can do is ask the standard questions that come up whenever someone says they've made a scientific breakthrough.

Does the Maharishi Effect fit in with everything else we know about the natural world? Do the researchers have a solid theoretical basis for their claim? Are the experimental results compelling? Has the research been replicated by an independent institution?

As far as I can tell, the answer is “no” to all of these. Of course, I’m not a scientist. I have discussed the Maharishi Effect with a number of experts, however, and they told me that scientists aren’t necessarily better equipped than the rest of us. When scientists review technical literature, they can parse the jargon and the diagrams, but that only takes them so far. They don’t see the underlying data or the actual research process. They ask the same questions I listed above. A lot of it boils down to faith in the scientific method and trust in the reputation of the researcher.

The Maharishi Effect and other paranormal claims demand a lot of faith. It’s like staking everything on the lottery. Are you willing to toss out all of science, everything that we know to be true about the natural world, on the slim chance that a miracle might pan out?

When the vast majority of scientists don’t take the bet, it’s not because they’re biased or part of some big conspiracy. They’re just doing their job, the same job that any concerned, aware citizen would do.

When the TM movement comes up with solid evidence for the Maharishi Effect, they will have the faculty of every physics department in the world knocking at their door. Until then, they will continue to be ignored, which is just as it should be.

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In spite of the high-tech trappings, the evidence for the Maharishi Effect isn’t that different from the murky photos offered by Victorian ghost hunters. When paranormal researchers storm the astral plane, the evidence they bring back is always dicey. Noisy recordings, third-party testimonials, statistical correlations at the limit of mathematical perception.

Generations of paranormal researchers have produced a mountain of data. However, since the evidence isn’t very compelling, it hasn’t convinced many people who weren’t believers to begin with.

Believers are naturally frustrated by the lack of interest. I’ve discussed the situation with a lot of them over the years and I’ve heard two explanations. The first is the conspiracy theory I discussed above, the one about mainstream scientists suppressing anything that rocks the boat.

The second argument is deeper and more consequential. It begins with an admission that the evidence is weak or nonexistent. However, according to this line of reasoning, that’s just how paranormal phenomena work. They operate in ways that aren’t perceptible by scientific method. In other words, as soon as you start measuring psychic powers, they vanish.

This argument asks us to make a special case for the paranormal. Everything else in nature (including quantum phenomena) gets clearer the more you investigate it. Everything else fits the broad rules presented to us by nature itself. Are we supposed to

make an exception for trance channeling and telekinesis? I don't think that the universe works that way.

Those who ask for special treatment for their paranormal beliefs often phrase it as a personal affirmation. "I know what I saw with my own eyes. It may not be *your* truth, but it's *my* truth."

This tactic closes off all paranormal experience, from the Maharishi Effect down to the Ouija board, from public view into a hermetically sealed personal box. (The fact that these experiences are hidden is why they're "occult.")

The obvious question for those who go down this path is: why should I believe you? Since there's no way to verify your claims, what reason would I have to believe your particular revelation over the dozen contradictory ones I hear at a typical cocktail party?

For that matter, how would anyone else know that you're not just deluded? What's the difference? Should you really expect any reaction other than raised eyebrows?

Whatever value there may be in the supernatural, for good or bad, is purely personal. For instance, some people see magic or trance channeling as a spiritual practice. If they say that it helps them, who am I to argue?

Individual beliefs may be harmless enough as far as they go. For instance, many people have had precognitive experiences where they think of a person they haven't seen in years just before that person calls on the phone. That's a perfectly normal situation—thoughts and phone calls obey the laws of probability and statistics, the mind obeys the law of selective attention. It's pretty mundane.

For some, though, this experience provides a sense of connectedness with the wider universe, a belief that we're all part of a cosmic whole. I'd say that a sense of connectedness is a good thing. If it came out of aesthetic appreciation for the laws of probability and statistics, that would be great. Unfortunately, many people attribute this mundane experience to ESP or some pseudoscientific properties of quantum mechanics.

Attaching a good outcome to a false premise strengthens the false premise. At the very least, this mistake encourages gullibility and superstition. The costs may be small—wasted time and money—or large enough to engulf a whole nation.

### Part III: Quantum failure

It's hard to imagine now, but, in its early years, the TM movement really did seem like a "taste of utopia." It was a magnet for spiritual types—people who were more interested in meditation and enlightenment than material success. It was a comfortable refuge for those who didn't fit into the "real world"—artists, Tolkien freaks, hitchhikers, protesters, recovering potheads. In the early days, the atmosphere was low-key, informal, and fun.

Aside from sharing a meditation technique, movement people had a sense of shared purpose. The movement was the instrument of Maharishi's "World Plan," his project to transform human society into an "Age of Enlightenment."

The details of the Age of Enlightenment were always sketchy aside from the usual peace and happiness for all. This haziness left a lot of room for personal interpretation.

As part of the movement's Haight-Ashbury contingent, I assumed that the Age of Enlightenment would be like the counterculture except bigger—a global love-in with free sitar music. I heard enough variations on this theme—geodesic domes in the country, swords into plowshares—to mistake it for the party line. It was a serious comedown when the other shoe dropped.

I'll always remember a dinner-table discussion about the upcoming presidential election of 1976. A few were for Ford and a few were for Carter. One perky young woman insisted that nobody in the TM movement should waste their time voting. Any day now, the Age of Enlightenment would dawn and America would adopt a caste system with Maharishi and his followers as the new lords and ladies.

I confronted her with a lame protest about Abraham Lincoln going from his log cabin to the White House. She seemed genuinely baffled by this argument. "But," she asked in a concerned tone, "don't you want to be known as Lord Geoff?"

At first I was as baffled as she was, but I got used to it. A surprising number of Maharishi's followers assumed that their service to the movement would be rewarded by a mansion with a staff of servants, a position of leadership in the coming world government, and the gratitude of all humanity.

The funny thing is that the Vanderbilt-wannabe crowd lived side by side with the hippies who were in it for the peace and love and groovy vibes. Both groups—call them the right and the left for lack of anything better—worked their buns off to help Maharishi create the Age of Enlightenment, which they all thought they understood.

What's more, they all believed Maharishi's teachings about the transformative power of consciousness. They all, left and right, believed that meditation would turn their desires into reality. The fact that these desires were mutually exclusive never came up.

We all know how it turned out. That perky young woman I argued with over the dinner table years ago understood Maharishi's intentions much better than I did. After a lifetime of personal micromanagement, the TM movement is a grim, authoritarian theocracy. A medieval caste system—complete with a god-king and his court of rajas—where status is determined largely by the size of one's bank account.

The hippies and free spirits left a long time ago, of course. But so did anybody with any common sense. Some of us look back with regret, some in anger, and some with bemused

detachment. We all share a heritage of bitter irony. We gave everything we had to create a reality that was the total opposite of what we wanted.

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I'd like to reprint a quote that's received a lot of media attention in the last few years. The speaker is a "White House aide" who is generally believed to be Karl Rove. He is talking to a reporter about the relationship of the press and the Bush administration.

*"We're an empire now, and when we act, we create our own reality. And while you're studying that reality – judiciously, as you will – we'll act again, creating other new realities, which you can study too, and that's how things will sort out. We're history's actors . . . and you, all of you, will be left to just study what we do."*

Aside from its overall creepiness, I'm struck by a couple of things in this quote including the new age language. "You create your own reality" is an axiom among trance-channelers, quantum healers, and my friends in the TM movement. Of course, Rove (or whoever) isn't talking about quantum consciousness or "energy" or ectoplasm or any other new age window dressing. He's talking about brutal authority and raw power, but it boils down to the same thing.

The other striking thing about this quote is the occult mentality of the speaker. It may seem peculiar to label Rove, Bush, and their neocon ilk as occultists, but the label fits. They operate in secret to advance a utopian agenda in accordance with revealed truths visible only to believers.

The utopia of the neocons looks a lot like the grim, authoritarian theocracy that Maharishi successfully created out of the TM movement. There's another parallel.

The neocons came to power during a period when a good chunk of the American public retreated into the kind of subjectivity I remember from the TM movement. Millions of Americans adopted new age beliefs—meditating, performing healing rituals, "visualizing world peace"—in the hope of enlightening the planet, just as my friends in the movement had done. Meanwhile, the neocons were promoting their own form of the occult—Biblical literalism, "Intelligent Design," conspiracy theories. Guess who won?

The drama of the TM movement played out on a national scale. While the new agers were meditating, the authoritarians took over. It's almost as if the two sides had an understanding, a gentleman's agreement, a secret treaty between the right-wing occult and the left-wing occult. "We'll meditate and hope for a better world while you destroy everything we believe in."

The pattern is so solid I think it deserves formalization as a law, a law inspired by the Heisenberg Uncertainty Principle. Here is the Law of Quantum Failure:

“If you believe that you create your own reality, you will automatically create the worst reality possible.”

Here’s another formulation:

“If you believe that you create your own reality, you will automatically create your enemy’s reality.”

I showed how this process worked in the TM movement, but there are plenty of other examples in the world of the “left wing occult.” For instance, many people are familiar with the “recovered memory” movement—the subculture of those who believe that they’ve uncovered traumatic memories of sexual abuse via hypnosis or other controversial therapies.

Like the neocon political quote, sexual abuse might not seem very “occult.” Abuse is tragically real and widespread. The recovered memory fad, however, was a form of revealed truth visible only to believers. It was just as occult as astrology or Intelligent Design.

As I see it, the interesting thing about the recovered memory fad was how it obeyed the Law of Quantum Failure, the way it played into the hands of the enemy. Most of its adherents were women—feminists or just non-political Jane Does—who saw recovered memory therapy as a form of healing and empowerment, a way of leveling the field in a male-dominated culture.

This is a goal we can all support. The strategy backfired, however, when subjective fantasies turned into real-world accusations of rape and murder. Since the fragile memories had no grounding in reliable fact, they dissolved under scrutiny and the movement collapsed with the whole world watching. (For example, see “Memory Therapy Leads to a Lawsuit And Big Settlement” by Pam Belluck, New York Times, 11/6/1997.)

Here is a case where “creating your own reality” sent innocent people to jail. Recovered memory therapy may have given some of its adherents a temporary boost of strength or confidence, but at great cost.

The real damage may be to people who actually were abused. They may have a harder time convincing anyone due to the suspicion and bad publicity caused by recovered memory therapy. The ultimate beneficiary is the old-boy network, the guys who always try to cover up or belittle sexual abuse and now have extra ammunition. The Law of Quantum Failure holds.

I can think of other cases where the “left wing occult” plays into the hands of the enemy. Some oppressed minority groups promote pseudo-historical myths that give their members a sense of greatness. “Afrocentrism” includes fantastic stories of ancient Egyptian aircraft and computers and other high tech. Some feminists and pagans claim

that male-dominated culture is a fairly recent invention and that ancient human society was a peaceful matriarchy.

These ideas may offer solace to people who have been on the wrong end of the stick too often. Since they're factually wrong, however, the golden age myths play into the hands of the oppressors. If an Afrocentrist protests about, say, employment discrimination, the Rush Limbaughs of the world can point to the stuff about ancient Egypt as proof that Afrocentrists are wrong about everything.

As a progressive, I cringe when people I sympathize with start creating their own realities. When I hear somebody say "It's *my* truth and I believe it even if there's no objective proof," I get very nervous. I saw how it turned out in the TM movement and I see it happening all over on a much bigger scale.

The parallels between the sad end of the TM dream and the neocon takeover of the American political system are striking. Fortunately, they aren't complete.

For one thing, the movement is a 100% hermetically-sealed theocracy. No dissent, no outside opinions, no possibility of change. The nation as a whole hasn't slipped that low yet, even after a generation of conservative dominance.

Partly it's a matter of size. The TM movement is a very small sandbox, and people who get fed up can leave. More important, however, is that the United States still has some functioning checks and balances, some tolerance for dissent, and some skepticism. None of those things ever existed in the TM world. Their absence killed Maharishi's movement, but the country as a whole may survive because of them.

Those of us who came out of the old counterculture can still play an important role, as can those in the alternative spiritual community—new agers, pagans, Gnostics, healers, meditators, Wiccans, spiritualists, yoga practitioners, et cetera. After all, we've been clued-in longer than most. We understood the dead-end materialism of American culture decades ago.

In general, we believe in openness and tolerance. As a group, we're remarkably free of bigotry and the need to dominate others. Heck, we could make a big difference... or we could if it weren't for the Law of Quantum Failure. Once the psychic powers and golden age fantasies come in, all the wisdom and good intentions in the world can't help.

Occult beliefs make you weaker, and weakness attracts The Man. He might show up as Rush Limbaugh or Karl Rove, mocking everything you believe in while cutting you out of the loop. He might show up as an opportunistic guru like Maharishi, exploiting your beliefs for his own ends. Whatever the form, the Law of Quantum Failure ensures that he'll be there to wreck your dreams.

Avoiding this fate means avoiding the occult. Meditation and alternative spirituality have plenty of rewards that don't involve paranormal or pseudo-historical beliefs. We can jettison that stuff and gain a lot of strength and credibility without losing anything.

We tried creating our own reality and it failed. Our future, if we have one, lies in the rational, objective, scientific world that we all inhabit. It may not seem exciting after the mystical wonders of the last generation, but it's our best hope.

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